

## LESSON 5C—NARRATIVE: WHAT DO SHELTERS TELL US ABOUT ANCIENT PEOPLE?

Ancient shelters and their contents provide much information for archaeologists and help them learn about prehistoric cultures. The types of dwellings and the artifacts found at **habitation** sites tell us about the lifeways of the people who lived in our region during prehistoric times, just as different houses, towns, and cities across the world today tell about the people who live in them. Archaeologists are able to estimate the **size** and **composition** of the prehistoric groups who inhabited these shelters and sites by the numbers and kinds of different structures. Structures made of wood can sometimes be dated through **dendrochronology**. (See **Lesson 3F—Narrative: How Do Archaeologists Analyze and Date Ancient Technology?** for an explanation of dendrochronology.) When hearths are found inside structures, they can be aged by **radiocarbon dating**. Archaeologists can even use the amount of **lichen** growth on tipi ring stones, and on stones used in other structures, to estimate the relative age of a site. By studying the placement of doorways away from the prevailing wind, archaeologists are sometimes able to determine the season of the year when a structure was used.

Artifacts discarded inside a structure allow scientists to determine what foods ancient people ate and what **household** activities they performed. The picture of prehistoric life is often

*Shelters provide important evidence about the lifeways of ancient people.*

enriched by the **perishable** artifacts found at habitation sites. Caves, rock-shelters, pithouses, and sometimes wickiups and cribbed log structures often provide abundant artifacts made of bone, antler, and stone. Finding and analyzing these artifacts greatly increases the ability of archaeologists to interpret shelter sites. Unlike other early shelters, tipi rings frequently yield few artifacts. This may be because they were occupied for only short periods.

From their study of shelters, archaeologists have concluded that ancient Montanans were **adaptable** and **flexible**. These early people adapted their style of living to the resources available at a given time and place for use in shelter, subsistence, and technology. Although the tipi may have been their preferred shelter, they made use of many other types of shelter. Sometimes they found tipi hides or poles difficult to obtain. This was especially so in difficult climates or among groups far from wooded areas. Sometimes their tipis burned or were stolen by enemies. When Lewis and Clark met the Shoshone Indians in southwestern Montana in 1805, the Shoshone had only one tipi! The rest had been stolen by an enemy war party. This kind of situation probably occurred in the prehistoric past. Montana's weather was harsh, ever-changing, and unpredictable. Prehistoric groups included not only young men and women, but also children, elders, and sick and crippled people. The continued survival of the

band was only possible through the group's ability to adjust to situations and to use a wide range of short- and long-term shelter types.

Montana's ancient people were nomadic hunters and gatherers, moving regularly in search of food and other resources. They often left only a few traces of their existence on the landscape. Habitation sites with shelter structures reflect ancient homes and are extremely important to archaeologists in their efforts to solve the mystery of the past. All prehistoric shelters are fragile and rare. Their preservation is of the utmost concern. Unfortunately, many caves, rockshelters, pithouses, wickiups, and tipi rings

have been disturbed by **pothunters** digging to find ancient "treasures." Seldom do pothunters find any treasures. Pothunting is not only often illegal, but it also destroys irreplaceable information, making it more difficult for future generations to enjoy, and learn about, the past.

You can assist in the preservation of the past by reporting any archaeological find to your local Forest Service or Bureau of Land Management office or the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) in Helena. At these offices, professional archaeologists are available to help preserve and protect ancient sites.

## LESSON 5C—VOCABULARY: WHAT DO SHELTERS TELL US ABOUT ANCIENT PEOPLE?

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composition \_\_\_\_\_

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dendrochronology \_\_\_\_\_

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flexible \_\_\_\_\_

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habitation \_\_\_\_\_

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household \_\_\_\_\_

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lichen \_\_\_\_\_

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perishable artifacts \_\_\_\_\_

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pothunters \_\_\_\_\_

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radiocarbon dating \_\_\_\_\_

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size \_\_\_\_\_

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